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THE WAR-LYRICS OF ENGLAND.

A steed! a steed of matchlesse speed,
A sword of metal keene.

I.

BEOWULF TO BURNS.

THE earliest form of poetry, the poetry of a nation's childhood, is the romantic. Then it is that the nation is aglow with triumph, with visions of dominion and glory. Its bards, fired by martial inspiration, burst forth into songs of valor; and to the clangor of these stirring hymns the hardy warriors rush yet more eagerly forward to battle. Thus sang Tyrtæus to the brave Peloponnesians; thus sang Simonides of Thermopylæ; thus, in a later day, chanted the scôp at Salisbury plain; and thus, still later, the troubadours at Hastings. Often these scattered songs, or fragments of song, have been preserved from generation to generation; have become embedded in the tales growing up around some mythical or legendary hero; and have then, with these myths and legends, been woven by some wonderful bard into one long great poem, which has become the national epic. Thus, it is believed, grew up the "Iliad;" thus, it is certain, grew up the later European epics. There is scarcely a great modern nation without one. Spain has its "Song of the Cid;" France, its "Song of Roland;" Scandinavia, its "Eddas;" Germany, its "Nibelungenlied;" while our own English race has the most wonderful of the five, its "Beowulf."

With epic poetry, however, it is not the purpose of our essay to deal. We are to confine ourselves to a discussion, not of war poetry in general, but of war poetry of the lyric type only. What that type is, what its nature and classifications, will appear best in the course of the development of our subject; and to that end, it is our purpose to begin with

a historical account of the growth of this important constituent of our magnificent body of English poetry.

Throughout the "Beowulf" occur many passages of a lyrical nature, whose relation to the whole poem, however, places them outside the scope of our discussion. The first purely lyrical war-poem that we know of in English is the fragment known as the "Fight at Finnsburg;" which, with one of the war-poems and several elegies, constitutes the chief lyric product of the Anglo-Saxon period. The fragment is usually associated with "Beowulf." Although the work of another bard, it is probably of the same age, and is founded upon an incident related in the epic. Finn, King of Friesland and overlord of Jutland, entices into his power Hnaef, the brother of his own queen, Hildeburh. Then while Hnaef, with Hengest, his lieutenant, and sixty brave Danes, is asleep at night in the great hall, Finn surrounds it with the intention of slaughtering his entrapped guests. Hnaef, aroused from his slumbers by the shouts of the besiegers, calls his comrades together and exhorts them to defiance of the assailants.

But do ye awake now, men of war of mine,
Have your hands a-ready, think on hero deeds.
Fight ye in the front, be of fiery mood.
. . . Then did many a thegn
Rise, begemmed with gold, girt him with his sword.

A vivid and passionate description follows of the "gleam of swords;" "of the wail of deadly battle;" of how

All the house-floor rang again;
Till amid the fight headlong fell Garulf;

of the "good men many" that fell around him; of the "raven, swart and sallow brown, hovering over the corpses."

Never heard I that more nobly sixty heroes brave
Better bore themselves in the battle strife of men.
Never since did swains of war better pay for sweetened mead
Than his house carles then paid to Hnaef their due.
Five of days they fought and there fell of them,
Of his war men, none.

There are only fifty lines to the fragment. The last few

record the death of Hnaef, who, dying, turns over his command to Hengest. It is at this point that the legend is taken up by the epic, in which it forms the fourth episode—the story sung at the feast in Heorot after the slaying of the monster Grendel by Beowulf.

The other great war-poem referred to is of a somewhat later period. The merit of this lyric, the “Brunanburgh,” like that of the “Fight at Finnsburg” and of the early elegies, is relative rather than absolute; it bears its high reputation rather by virtue of the fact that it is one of the few Anglo-Saxon poems now known to us than by virtue of any great intrinsic merit. Yet there are passages in this poem, as also in the others, so picturesque, so passionate, so utterly devoid of conventionality, that it may well be doubted whether any later English war poetry can in these qualities excel them. Certain it is, that in the power to convey impressions of horror, of gloom, of sepulchral dismalness, no poetry of our day can surpass these uncouth outbursts of our rude forefathers. Their portrayals of the battle-field after the fight—what a horrible sensation they produce!

Behind them they left to have lust of the dead
Him of the sallow coat, him the swart raven,
Horny-nebbed fowl; and the ash-feathered one,
White-tailed, the earn, to rejoice in the carrion,
And the greedy war hawk, and that grizzled beast,
Wolf of the weald.

With these gloomy but wonderfully realistic impressions of old English heroism and scorn of death, we are left for a period of over six hundred years during which the martial element in lyric poetry is almost vanished. A few battle poems, it is true, occur even in that barren period, and battle poems, too, of a merit far above mediocrity. But they are rather elegiac than triumphant; bewailing rather the loss of life and destruction of property than celebrating the glories of victory and the pride of death in battle. Such a poem is the “Ruined Burg,” which describes the ruins of some city, perhaps Bath, sacked by the invading Saxons. This event occurred in the sixth century. A century later,

the Saxon scôp, standing amid the decay and desolation of the ruins, was moved to lament those who had succumbed to the onslaught of his own fierce people. The poem has been unduly praised. It is very obscure in places, has many conventional touches, and is almost totally lacking in the true martial element. Nevertheless, it contains some passages of which no literature need be ashamed.

All forworn are they, forlorn in death are they
.
In a slaughter wide they fell, woful days of bale came on;
Famine-death fortook fortitude from men;
All their battle bulwarks bare foundations were.
Crumbled is the castle keep.¹

In the same elegiac strain, and of about the same age, is a Welsh lyric which laments the ruin of the "White Town," supposed to be Uriconium. The poem is not English, but it is connected with an English battle, and it affected, beyond a doubt, with other Welsh poems, the English poetry of the period. It far surpasses the "Ruined Burg" in lyrical beauty.

The White Town in the Valley!
Joyful its troop with the common spoil of battle;
Its people are they not gone?

The White Town between Tren and Trodwyd,
More common was the broken shield
Coming from battle than the evening ox.

The White Town between Tren and Traval,
More common was the blood
On the surface of the grass than the plowed fallow.

This disappearance of the martial element, with the correspondingly increasing prominence of the elegiac, is easily accounted for. England had been conquered from the Britain, and the Saxon was now lord of half the island. But with dominion come jealousy and avarice, and now East Saxon and West Saxon were arrayed against each other. Their strength was wasted amid internecine strug-

¹The extracts quoted above from the "Fight at Finnsburg," the "Brunanburgh," the "Ruined Burg," and the "Welsh Elegy," are from the translations by Stopford A. Brooke.

gles; so that when a new generation of Vikings, knowing not the deeds of their Saxon brethren, came upon the scene, Saxon dominion succumbed before Danish prowess. England lay almost helpless at the foot of the Dane until the arm of Alfred restored it partly to its former conquerors.

Such a period of strife is not conducive to poetic enthusiasm. The scôp ceases to be a maker and turns simply chanter. Literary creativeness turns to new fields. Amid all the confusion of those dark times Christianity was introduced; and monasteries of faith and learning, like that of Jarrow, sprang up. Cædmon sang "Paraphrases;" the runic acrostics of Cynewulf appeared in the "Christ" and the "Elene;" English prose began in the "Ecclesiastical History" of Bede. The ravages of the Danes soon shattered even this unmarital literature, and from that eclipse until long after the death of Alfred ensued a most dreary period. The coming of the Normans struck once more a blow at everything Anglo-Saxon. At Hastings it was the "Song of Roland" that inspired the knights of the Conqueror to victory. Ere another century had elapsed the language of the troubadours was mingling with the language of the scôps, and two centuries later the poet Chaucer established this Anglo-Saxon mixture as the literary dialect of England.

Chaucer himself was not a lyrist. It remained for poets of a far inferior genius to sow the seeds of plants that were eventually to blossom into the odes of Collins, the songs of Burns, and the "Lyrical Ballads." But rude as were these poems, they are far from being devoid of merit. They are full of a refreshing sprightliness, a touching simplicity, and a tender love for the beauties of nature. The meadows and the woodlands, the notes of the cuckoo, and the deeds of Robin Hood, these are the themes of these early songsters; and along with this enthusiasm came an inspiration of another sort. The two great Edwards were coming upon the scene, and England was beginning to taste of the glories of conquest. From this inspiration sprang one of the most interesting possessions of literature: the English ballad.

For several centuries this was the prevailing form of Eng-

lish poetry. The diction and style of these ballads are simple, direct, and unpretentious; for although rendered by changes which the language has undergone, chiefly in spelling, somewhat obscure to modern readers, they were easily intelligible to readers of that time. Their subjects were popular, and frequently the events they celebrated were still fresh in the minds of the people. It was a popular literature, and it deserved its popularity. Even to this day no real lover of poetry can fail to be touched by the artless and unshakeable devotion of the "Not-Browne Mayde" or by the ill-fated love of "Sweet William" and "Fair Margaret." These, however, are romantic ballads; while it is our province to notice only the other type, the historic.

Of this type of ballad the most remarkable are those of "Chevy-Chase" and "Otterbourne." The former is the more famous. It was for generations a highly popular song, that stirred alike the soul of youth and age, of villain and lord, of soldier and scholar. Sir Philip Sidney "never heard the olde songe of Percy and Duglas, that he found not his heart moved more than with a trumpet;" Ben Jonson would rather have been the author of it alone than of all his own lyrics and dramas; and even Addison, in that conventional age of his, wrote an appreciative critique upon it in the *Spectator*.

The date of the ballad is uncertain; it is hardly earlier than the accession of Henry VI., and hardly later than that of Elizabeth. The events it celebrates have no authority from history, but are founded upon traditionary accounts of some border struggle. It was a law of the marches, often renewed between the two nations, that neither party should hunt in the dominions of the other without leave from the lord of those domains. A violation of this compact conveyed an insult, which insult, as a point of honor, had to be avenged. Such violations were frequent, so that there was almost a continual warfare going on between the fierce, proud marauders. Such a struggle it is that "Chevy-Chase" celebrates—a conflict between the rival houses of

Percy and Douglas. Lord Percy, in fulfilment of a vow to hunt for three days on the yonder side without leave of Lord Douglas, the warden of the marches, crossed the border and entered the Scottish domains. The Douglas, stung by the insult, determined to avenge it, and a bloody conflict was the result.

This battell begane in Chyviat
 An owar before the none,
 And when even-song bell was rung
 The battell was nat half done.

At length "the Duglas and the Perse met." Fast and fiercely they fought, hand-to-hand, unwearied, and

Ther-to the wear full fayne,
 Till the bloode owte of thear basnetes sprete,
 As ever did heel or rayne.

"Holde thee, Persé," sayd the Duglas,
 ' "And i' faith I shall thee brynge
 Wher thowe shalt have a yerls wagis
 Of Jamy owre Scottish kyng.

"Thowe shalt have thy ransom fre,
 I hyght thee here this thyng,
 For the manfullyste man yet art thowe,
 That ever I conqueryd in fiede fightyng."

"Nay," then sayd the Lord Persé,
 "I tolde it thee beforne,
 That I wolde never yeldye be
 To no man of a woman born."

With that ther cam an arrowe hastely
 Forth of a mightie wane (man),
 Hit hath strekene the yerle Duglas
 In at the brest bane.

The Douglas dies and Percy is slain by "a suar spear of a mighty tree," in the hands of a Scottish knight. With them fell, too, many of their brave followers.

Of fifteen hondrith archers of Ynglonde
 Went away but fifti and three;
 Of twenty hondrith spearmen of Skotlonde,
 But even five and fifti.

The "Chevy-Chase" which Addison criticized is a modern version of the old ballad, which, though easier to read,

lacks the simple dignity of the original. What, for example, could be so simple and yet so impressive as the enumeration and description, in the old ballad of the slain?

For Wetharryngton my harte was woe,
That ever he slayne shulde be;
For when both his leggis were hewn in to,
Yet he kneeled and fought on hys knee.

In the modernized version the same stanza reads thus ridiculously:

For Witherington needs must I wayle,
As one in doleful dumpes;
For when his leggs were smitten off,
Yet he fought upon his stumpes.

These "doleful dumpes" were a product of the period just prior to the great Elizabethan outburst, when much of the English poetry then existing was in an analogous condition.

The "Battle of Otterbourne" was written earlier than "Chevy-Chase," probably about the time of Richard II. or slightly after. It is founded upon a true historical incident. This event occurred in the year 1388; the result, like the battle of Chevy-Chase, of a border feud, in which, too, a Percy and a Douglas were the principals. This time, though, it is not the Percy who is the aggressor. James, Earl of Douglas, in command of an expedition gotten up by a number of Scottish nobles at the instigation of the Earl of Fife, a younger son of the aged and infirm King Robert, of Scotland, invaded England for the purpose of seeking reprisal for injuries suffered at various times by the Scotch at the hands of the English. Richard II. was at the time engaged in a struggle with Parliament and his troublesome uncle, the Duke of Gloucester. The command of the English forces was therefore left to Henry Percy, surnamed "Hotspur," the son of the Duke of Northumberland. Percy was victorious, and Douglas was slain.

The Scottish version of this ballad—Scott has given one in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*—differs greatly from the English version. It is to the latter that we now

refer. Its merit is fully equal to that of "Chevy-Chase;" its form renders it, too, somewhat obscure to modern readers; but it is fully worthy of whatever praise it has received. Its directness of narration and simplicity of description cannot fail to appeal to us—qualities by the imitation of which many of the puny bardlings of a later day would have profited. The opening stanza is illustrative:

Yt felle abowght the Lamasse tyde,
 When husbonds wynn ther haye,
 The dowghtye Dowglasse bowynd hym to ryde,
 In Englonde to take a praye.

The passage describing the encounter of Percy and Douglas is even more spirited than the similar passage in "Chevy-Chase:"

They swapped together, whyll that they swette,
 Wyth swordes scharpe and longe;
 Ych on another so faste they beete,
 Tyll ther helmes cam in peyses down.
 The Percy was a man of strength,
 I tell yow in thys stounde,
 He smote the Dowglas at the swordes length,
 That he fell to the growynde.
 The sworde was scharpe and sore can byte,
 I tell yow in certayne;
 To the harte, he cowde hym smyte;
 Thus was the Dowglas slayne.

Notice also these four lines, which "sayde Syr Harye Percy" to his men before the battle:

Every man think on hys trewe love,
 And marke hym to the Trenite:
 For to God I make myne avowe
 Thys day wyll I not fle.

How simple and yet how urgent, this bit of exhortation! What a pleasant intimation, too, in this trooper's fair "trewe love," of the Rosalinds and Unas, the Imogens and Desdemonas, that were soon to render immortal the great Elizabethans.

The age of Elizabeth is one of the greatest literary epochs in all history, ancient or modern. In English literature there

is only one other period at all comparable to it—the era of Burns, of Wordsworth and Coleridge, of Shelley and Keats. The former is the great dramatic period, the latter the great lyric. Spenser is a great lyrist, and Shakspeare, in addition to being the greatest of English dramatists, is a great lyrist; but their lyrics are of flowers and love, not of sabers and war. Of poetry on that theme the age is almost barren, though it is full of a soaring enthusiasm. The “Albion’s England,” a sort of history in verse, by William Warner, contains several martial passages not utterly devoid of merit; but they are narrative, not lyrical, and therefore not within the scope of our discussion. In the whole Elizabethan era there occurs but one war-lyric of high merit. That one lyric, however, ranks among the greatest of all war-poems. It is the famous “Ballad of Agincourt,” written in the year 1620 by Michael Drayton.

Even before this date a number of ballads had been written celebrating this same great victory. These ballads, like most of the early war-songs previously referred to, are rude in meter and homely in diction. The laureates of those early days knew little of art and had even less of genius; so that their productions cannot, in a fair critical estimate, be ranked at all high as poetry. They should not, however, be despised. Their enthusiasm of spirit and simplicity of style atone for many shortcomings. These early Agincourt ballads are not comparable to the early border ballads previously discussed. Nevertheless, they are worthy of our notice, if for no other reason than that they are the direct ancestors of what one living critic of note calls, somewhat rashly, “the best war-song in a language.” One of them, with a Latin refrain, was set to music and became a highly popular song. Let us quote the first stanza, with the refrain:

Owre kynge went forth to Normandy,
With grace and myyt of chivalry;
The God for hym wrouyt marvelously,
Wherefore Englonde may calle and cry

Deo gratias:

Deo gratias Anglia redde pro victoria.

Another, beginning

Agincourt, Agincourt,
Know ye not Agincourt?

is in the very meter of Drayton's ballad.

Though Drayton's poem should not be called the greatest war-song in the English language, it falls but little short of attaining that honor; it is certainly among the greatest of all war-poems. How far Tennyson's great battle-song may be indebted to it will be touched on later. We shall now give merely a hasty glance at the poem in hand. Its charm is due to several qualities—qualities which characterize, more or less, all great battle-songs: a simplicity of diction, a direct and concise yet noble phraseology, and a power of effective alliteration. A single stanza will at once illustrate these qualities:

Poitiers and Cressy tell,
When most their pride did swell,
Under our swords they fell,
 No less our skill is,
Than when our grandsire great,
Claiming the regal seat,
By many a warlike feat
 Lopped the French lillies.

The last line alone would have served our purpose amply. Its alliteration is perfect. Closely related to this power is another quality of Drayton's genius—a quality later so wonderful in Chatterton's verse—the power, or as the French call it, the science, of names. It is the ability to use proper names musically, suggestively, and picturesquely—exercised with especial felicity in this stanza:

Warwick in blood did wade,
Oxford the foe invade,
And cruel slaughter made,
 Still as they ran up;
Suffolk his ax did ply
Beaumont and Willoughby,
Bare them right doughtily,
 Ferrers and Fanhope.

In another stanza occurs a little passage of seven words

that is not a whit less wonderful than the best passage in the "Charge of the Light Brigade":

Trumpet to trumpet spake,
Thunder to thunder.

And this two hundred years before Tennyson.

One other battle-song of the period, known as "Tyrrell's Pass," deserves passing notice. It is a really thrilling account of the exploits of an Irish chieftain who succeeded, by a piece of brilliant strategy, in annihilating an English force sent by Elizabeth. It is still well known to-day.

A period of almost utter barrenness in martial literature of any kind or merit ensued. The day of the Rosalinds and Imogens was over, and in their stead had come a parlor full of artificial Celias and a study full of metaphysical Delias. Milton stands aloof, a solitary genius. He wrote lyrics of the highest order, but they are lyrics of the gentler emotions, not of war. Browne is merely a poet of the beauties of art and nature; Herrick, of gaiety and trivialities. The rest, until the era of Dryden, are in the main decidedly mediocre poets, a few of whom still live, deservedly by virtue of a dozen beautiful songs—Suckling and Lovelace, by virtue of several each; Waller, if only by virtue of the gem beginning "Go, lovely rose." One of Lovelace's, on "Going to the Wars," deserves passing notice here as being an approach to the kind of poetry we are discussing. It belongs to a noble class of lyrics which celebrate duty and honor and bravery in the abstract, rather than war. A similar song, of a later day, is Collins' "How Sleep the Brave," the sweetest lyric, perhaps, from Fletcher to Burns.

In Dryden, in the "Annus Mirabilis," we have an approach to a war-lyric. The "Attempt at Berghen," as part of a long narrative poem, is worthy of its author; but that author was a man of too little emotion to write an inspired, inspiring battle-song. In Addison's "Campaign" occurs a similar passage on the battle of Blenheim. It is in the classic couplet, which immediately places it beyond the scope of our discussion; let us spare it with merely an in-

sinuation of its conventionality. Pope, the man of his age, is devoid of lyrical merit. Johnson never attempted a strictly lyric poem. Goldsmith might have written good lyric poetry, but we would not exchange the tendernesses and sorrows of the "Deserted Village" for all that he might have done. It is in the Norse poems of Collins and Gray that we again have a glimpse of anything wild, and we must wait until the end of the century before we have another genuine battle-song.

LEO LOEB.